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Anthea Tinker and Jay Ginn, *An Age Friendly City: How Far Has London Come?* King's College, London, 2015, 56 pp., pbk, 978-1-908951-13-7

The feeble showing of London within the debates about an ageing population has long been a cause for puzzlement. Former Mayor of London Ken Livingstone's 'Valuing Older People' strategy of 2006 has been the only recent policy document of any substance. An earlier report by King's College on London (Biggs and Tinker 2007), commissioned by the World Health Organization, found high levels of satisfaction among older people with the provision of community centres, public transport and decent housing. Even 'a safe physical environment' was identified (Biggs and Tinker 2007: 15). If anything, it was the behaviour of the general public that caused focus-group respondents the greatest concern. The report under review here may stem as much from the Greater London Authority's own equality audits (Greater London Authority 2013) – which carries a statutory requirement to respond – as from public pressure in the city.

This report is built around an imaginative and wide-ranging desk-top review, with over 150 items in its bibliography. Data of considerable depth and detail has been brought together in a highly compressed format which buzzes with information. Although Tinker and Ginn are pungent in their criticism, they are more generous in their assessment of the performance and approach of the Greater London Authority than I would have anticipated. It seems evident that officials from Boris Johnson's (Mayor of London since 2008) office have got on with implementing many of his predecessor's intentions, with respect to a Lifetime Homes strategy, support for volunteering and, most impressively, through the ongoing improvements to mainstream public transport. However, despite improvements in its quality (p. 22), accessible door-to-door transport for disabled older people may be another matter (p. 19). Its rapidly reducing availability in some London boroughs makes it a signature species for the impact of central government spending cuts, which Tinker and Ginn identify as now inhibiting progress in London and directly affecting the kind of facilities, like libraries, community and day centres, that older residents in the earlier study valued so much. There's a sense overall that while older people benefit from the mainstreaming of accessibility within broad statutory guidelines, they risk being less well served when the requirements are age- or disability-specific.

The report deploys a model of eight policy areas originally set out by the World Health Organization. Each chapter discusses, first, the relevant features of wellbeing and social inclusion. It then goes on to identify developments since 2005, before highlighting gaps that need to be addressed. The initial chapter sequence has a spatial logic, starting with Housing, and moving on to the immediate Neighbourhood, before considering Transport. It then looks at participation in the Social, Cultural and Civic

environment before discussing Employment – only 7 per cent of Londoners over the age of 65 have a job, while 5 per cent are self-employed – Skills and Income. The final three chapters consider Community Support and Health Services, Communication, and Respect and Social Inclusion. There's a useful consideration of what can be learned from other parts of the world. While keen proponents of life-long learning and community arts might demur, this overall design is well thought out and comprehensive.

The executive summary brings together a series of well-crafted recommendations. The tone is set by the forthright proposals regarding housing: the need for a variety of lifetime homes (in which co-housing figures prominently); making public land available for new social housing; reigning in incentives to investment for capital gain; introducing rent controls. This is a bold approach which sets 'age-friendliness' within a broader strategy for both housing and the built environment. It aligns older people's needs within a holistic approach, recognising the importance of public control and making the case for democratic accountability. Thereafter, it's perhaps inevitable that the recommendations become more of a shopping list: better-maintained pavements; public toilets and bus-shelters; consultation about open space; protecting community centres and libraries; providing a more 'legible' city; supporting employment; index-linking winter fuel payments; providing better home-care; more rigorous standards of training in care homes; more age-sensitive digitalisation. Particularly welcome, given the current approach of the police, in particular, is the recommendation that 'digital communication, especially by the public sector, should always be accompanied by other means' (p. 8).

Other broad counter-strategies, like protecting against poverty, reducing traffic and tackling air pollution, are made explicit. The ring-fencing of public health budgets within a London-wide demarcation would also make sense, but given the problems of teasing out with any consistency when action is needed at micro-, meso- and meta-levels, the authors are perhaps wise to be reticent. On the other hand, it is surprising they align themselves so firmly with older people's enthusiasm for local hospitals (p. 34) without reviewing progress towards making intensive health care available at the neighbourhood level and even in the home. The authors also propose an ambitious strategy to counter ageism, among the general public, at an institutional level (including the removal of upper age limits), and in the media. This is something they rightly argue the Greater London Authority is well-placed to pursue, although the relevant section (pp. 41–2) is notably lacking in illustrations from London itself.

There are, as I've already suggested, some omissions. London's burgeoning community arts sector is not mentioned. The authors may have missed the rise to prominence of a more middle-class, post-professional, retirement culture – some of it shaped by campaigning and activism and often subscription-based – in London over the last five or ten years. There are now nearly 40 branches of the University of the Third Age in the city, claiming to involve around 18,000 members. The involvement of older people within London's myriad small associations (many of them serving minority

ethnic groupings) is a neglected field but surely an important one for a better understanding of the mutually supportive, self-directed components of age-friendliness. The relationship between older people involved in such groupings, those using public provision and that of the contracted voluntary sector is also poorly understood, so that collaboration is often weak. This dysfunctionality goes some way to explaining why the older population punches so far below its weight with respect to later life policy-making in London. In my view, this ‘collaboration deficit’ should be the number one priority for investigation, training and practice development.

The fact remains, however, that any comprehensive approach is currently beyond the capability of London’s under-resourced civic leaderships and its divided infrastructure. The city’s unparalleled use value as a cultural centre (particularly since the last Labour government made museum and gallery entrance free) and as a global entertainment centre provides many compensations for older residents and visitors. But as a key node for globalisation and the free movement of capital, London is not being governed in the interests of its residents. Neither the Mayor nor the local authorities have adequate powers or resources. Moreover, at little more than 10 per cent of the overall population (down below 7 per cent in parts of east London, and seemingly set to decline further both as a percentage and in real numbers in some districts), voters over 65 cannot expect to wield the electoral influence in the city so often attributed to them at a national level.

Hopefully, in the run-up to the 2016 Mayoral election, activists and campaigners will recognise the capability of this report to focus and unify, and go on to make common cause around its many recommendations. Since 2013, the gradual strengthening of PAIL (Positive Ageing in London) gives some hope for more co-ordinated action across the city’s disconnected networks, particularly if it can help restore the participation of the boroughs alongside the Greater London Authority. Future reports of this kind might place less emphasis on consulting the older public (p. 8) and more on securing the involvement of the huge numbers of active older people who fail to align themselves within the policy arena at all.

I welcome this report, but while it has brilliantly crunched the London data and set us a bold, satisfying and challenging agenda, it has not adequately accounted for the evolving socio-cultural scene.

References

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